

Optimising Value: The Sheriff/Community Development Officers Initiative and the Challenges of Undertaking Evaluation in Remote Aboriginal Communities

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Introduction

The way you design an evaluation in the office and the way it pans out when you arrive thousands of kilometres into the desert can be different indeed! Life takes over and you must be able to gather the data you need in creative and flexible ways whilst still maintaining data integrity and meeting the objectives of the evaluation. On one hand is a need for evaluation planning and on the other flexibility.



Outback Western Australia

The Department of Corrective Services (DCS) outlined its *Reducing Aboriginal Imprisonment Strategy (2006)* to reduce the high rates of Aboriginal imprisonment in Western Australia (WA). The strategy consisted of eight short-term components to achieve reduced rates of imprisonment and improved service provision to Aboriginal people across the State. One of these components (Strategy Three) is the Sheriff/Community Development Officer (Sheriff/CDO) Initiative which aims to reduce fine default, and increase the use of 'time to pay' options, work and development orders (WDOs), and other alternatives to satisfy fines in remote areas in WA.

This conference presentation will discuss the requirements of designing evaluations in remote areas and the challenges of conducting a process evaluation of the Sheriff/CDO initiative in remote Aboriginal communities in WA. Rural, remote and regional communities provide unique evaluation contexts but pose challenges when planning research. It is essential that consideration is given to – language and literacy levels, culturally appropriate data gathering techniques, travel and access to participants, ethics and community benefit. Moreover, community consultation, negotiation, and collaboration are paramount to successful evaluation with Aboriginal people in remote areas.

Background to the Sheriff/CDO Initiative and Evaluation

Fines are the most frequently used penalty in the justice system of WA. The effective use of fines is generally seen as an important process in upholding justice and maintaining public confidence in the criminal justice process. It is also seen as a potentially effective deterrent for both re-offenders and first time offenders. The joint Sheriff/CDO initiative was a response to fine related issues in WA that has a direct bearing on imprisonment rates, and the integrity of the fines process. The initiative is targeted to Aboriginal offenders in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands (Goldfields), the Pilbara, the Gascoyne/Mid West and the Kimberley who are in fine default, who need fine related services, or are issued a WDO directly from Court. Non-Aboriginal offenders are also included in the participant group although the majority of participants are Aboriginal. Fine default is defined as the default penalty for non-payment of a fine and can result in licence suspension, seizure of goods, compulsory community work or, as a last resort, imprisonment. The WDO is an adult community based order issued and managed by DCS Community

Justice Services (CJS). It enables an unpaid court fine to be converted to community corrections activities and applies when the offender's circumstances are such that he/she is unable to pay the fine.

The objectives for the development of the joint Sheriff/CDO initiative are to:

- Deliver coordinated justice services (including fines management support services and community work management) that recognise and meet the cultural and socio-economic needs of this specific client group;
- Improve communication links and increase cross-cultural awareness between Western Australia Police Service in remote regions, DCS, Aboriginal elders and the Aboriginal people working together for the benefit of the communities;
- Establish and maintain close working relationships between the Sheriff's Office, CJS, indigenous people and relevant Indigenous organisations in each region;
- Support the management and sentencing options of the *Aboriginal Communities Act 1979*;
- Ensure the integrity of the fine as an effective sentencing option;
- Reduce fine default related imprisonment among Indigenous people by promoting realistic payment plans and community work as preferred options;
- Contribute to reducing recidivism by enabling Indigenous people to manage fines without incurring other sanctions and without jeopardising the gaining or retention of a motor driver's licence; and
- Implement a scheme for CenterPay direct debit deduction for the payment of fines as the most viable payment option for targeted clients within these remote regions.

The overall role of the Sheriff/CDO is to provide a total fines management solution and community development for the people of the regions including:

- Providing information on fines enforcement and related processes;
- Collecting payments for fines;
- Advising Courts and releasing authorities on disposition of offenders;
- Making arrangements for fines to be paid by instalments, including facilitating direct debits;
- Serving notices to report for Work and Development Orders;
- Arranging and supervising WDOs;
- Executing warrants of execution against goods;
- Contributing to the development and implementation of culturally appropriate programs for the management of Aboriginal offenders;
- Providing advice and participating with Aboriginal groups/persons to assist Aboriginal persons in dealing with the justice system and other agencies;
- Assisting in the development of other programmes and initiatives to support the rehabilitation, and re-socialisation of offenders (including providing services to offenders soon to be released from prison by providing them with options to satisfy any fines that will be outstanding upon release).

The Evaluation

The Research and Evaluation Team was tasked with undertaking a process evaluation of the initiative in 2006 and I was the evaluator. The aim of the evaluation was to assess whether the strategy was being implemented as planned and to make procedural recommendations to improve the initiative.

The evaluation involved undertaking semi-structured interviews, meetings and observations with 42 individual stakeholders or groups of stakeholders. The majority of the interviews took place in remote WA and CJS offices across the State. Specifically, I travelled across country (by 4WD vehicle) to 23 WA Aboriginal Communities with the Sheriff/CDOs, and in some cases a Juvenile Justice Officer.



Outback Western Australia – The Pilbara Region

The evaluation took place in the following Aboriginal

Communities in the four main regions of WA: 1) the Kimberley (Pandanus Park, Loma, Yungngora, Koorabye, Bayulu, Wangkatjungka, Bohemia Downs, Billuna, Balgo Hills, Halls Creek, Joy Springs, Fitzroy Crossing, and JunJuwa), 2) the Gascoyne/Midwest (Burringurrah and Yulga Jinna), 3) the Pilbara (Bellary, Jigalong, Wakathuni, and Parnpasinya), and 4) the Goldfields (Cosmo Newberry, Kanpa, Warburton, and Jameson). Please refer to the appendices for maps of WA. These maps help to illustrate the distances travelled and the remoteness of these communities.

Visits/interviews were also made to Police Stations, Aboriginal Health Services, the Department of Community Development, the Department of Planning and Infrastructure, CDEP Offices, Women's Refugees, Job Futures, TAFE and other community organisations in regional towns and communities to discuss current linkages and future relationship building.

The Process of Planning and Undertaking Evaluation in Remote Aboriginal Communities

Rural, remote and regional communities provide unique evaluation contexts but pose challenges when planning and undertaking evaluation and research initiatives. It was important that the evaluator consider a number of issues in the planning and design of the Sheriff/CDO evaluation and in the actual conduct of the evaluation. I would like to note that this kind of remote evaluation was new territory for the evaluator and I very much had to learn along the way. A number of challenges presented themselves when on the road. A good number of these were previously considered in the planning phases but others required flexibility on the ground. The key considerations and challenges related to the following themes:

- **Language** – consideration for language is very important when working with Aboriginal people as generally English is spoken as a second language, and the use of language when communicating with Aboriginal communities in remote areas can be different from that of the Non-Aboriginal community (the '*Protocols for Consultation and Negotiation with Aboriginal People*', by Huggins, J were consulted in the planning phase). In addition, in many of the 23 communities we visited the people spoke a different Aboriginal dialect (i.e., a different language). Language considerations were also important when it came to conducting the interviews. The interview schedules were written in plain English and an experienced interviewer undertook all the interviews (I am however female which can create some challenges). It is imperative that interviewers are receptive listeners, are patient and understanding and clarify the dialogue. It is important to listen to the people, who are in, and actually experiencing, the initiative.

- **Culturally Appropriate Data Gathering** - it is generally accepted that undertaking interviews face-to-face, to allow for discussions, a suitable length of time, and exploration of the topic, is an appropriate method for undertaking research with Aboriginal people. The interviews for this evaluation were all conducted face-to-face in a location chosen by the participant or that was convenient (for example, in office space, a patch of earth under a tree, the bonnet of the car or sitting with a large group of family members). We were on a schedule but we endeavoured not to place time limits on the interviews so that participants did not feel rushed and could share their stories. The photo above



- helps to demonstrate the kind of remote desert landscape where we were conducting interviews. From my experience conducting this evaluation I support the view that undertaking face-to-face interviews is the most constructive method for collecting data in remote communities. However, it is important that adequate planning is undertaken and that evaluators are invited and welcomed into the community. Travelling with an individual who has previous experience and relationships in the community will help when conducting interviews.
- **Travel/Accessing Participants** - access to remote communities is arduous, tiring, and time consuming. Therefore, appropriate time periods must be built into an evaluation framework for data collection. We generally travelled 12 hours a day on dirt roads with interviewing in between. There are not many facilities in these areas and often the Sheriff/CDOs camp. However, travelling by car is important and I was told anecdotally that you are better accepted in the communities if you drive (as this is what the local people do – they do not fly in and out!). You would be seen as out of the ordinary if you flew in and out and this may limit the information you receive. This is challenging as travelling these distances is time consuming; on average, I spent seven days in each of the four regions. In addition, the remoteness of these locations means that each region is very diverse and this presents different logistical and cultural issues. An additional advantage of travelling by vehicle was the opportunity it gave me to extensively speak with the Sheriff/CDOs and gain a thorough understanding of their role, their work and its challenges, and the way they have developed relationships in these remote areas.
- **Ethics** – consideration and reflection on the ‘*Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*’ (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)) was undertaken during the planning phases. Community consultation and acceptance prior to entering the communities was also an important consideration (discussed further below). This honest and open dialogue with Aboriginal people and communities is essential to the appropriateness of research and evaluation.
- **Community Benefit** – in my opinion (and much of the research literature) it is important for evaluation to provide some benefit to the communities in which it is undertaken. It is important to manage participant and community expectations by clearly explaining the evaluation purposes, outcomes, and the types of changes/improvements to services that can be expected. In the current process evaluation the aim was to write recommendations to improve the Sheriff/CDO initiatives functioning; this in turn improves service provision in the regions and helps Aboriginal people to pay their fines, increase the likelihood that they can gain a drivers licence, and reduce Aboriginal imprisonment rates related to fine default. Service provision is often limited in Aboriginal communities due to their remote locations and it is imperative that the services provided are responsive to the communities needs.

- **Community Collaboration and Relationship Building** - relationships are very important in Aboriginal culture. These relationships must be developed and nurtured over time and come with responsibilities. It is important that the relationships the DCS has developed with Aboriginal people are respected and mutually fostered. All Sheriff/CDOs have spent a considerable amount of time developing good working relationships with Aboriginal people in the regions. These relationships have been forged over a period of time by asking for permission to enter the community, explaining their and the Department's role, talking with the community Elders, driving/walking from house to house to introduce themselves and chat with people, and in some cases taking provisions (like clothes given to the CDOs for the community people from the St Vincent de Paul).

The Sheriff/CDOs have strong relationships with the Community people, including the Elders, and acted as a liaison point between the evaluator and the community; this was usually in conjunction with another community member, such as the Community Advisor. Some of the Sheriff/CDOs have even been given Aboriginal names. Travelling with individuals who have established these partnerships made access to the communities easier and the evaluator was generally well received. I felt that it was important for me to be very aware and respectful of these partnerships, and the need for respect and equality (mutual respect) was always present in my mind when interviewing conducting myself in the communities.



A campsite in Outback Western Australia

- **Prior Community Consultation** - all communities included in the sample were contacted prior to the visit to make sure that it was alright if the evaluator entered the community and undertook interviews with the Sheriff/CDO. At this time the evaluation was discussed and explained. It is important that research conducted in Aboriginal Communities is done with the invitation and acceptance of the local people and that community expectation is appropriately managed.
- **Reference Group** - Aboriginal staffs within the Department who have had experience working in remote areas, including remote managers, were consulted during the planning phase. In addition, a Project Reference Group was established to provide input on methodological issues and to guide the evaluation.
- **Conducting Interviews as a Female Researcher** – this is an issue that requires consideration when planning an evaluation, because in some cases Aboriginal women will not speak to a male interviewer and Aboriginal males will not speak to a non-Aboriginal female interviewer. Due to the logistics of this project it was not possible to employ more than one interviewer and gender issues were managed within the evaluation in the following way. I have experience working with Aboriginal males in prison populations and as the interviews were not on sensitive topics it was deemed appropriate to ask appropriate participants if they would like to be interviewed. If the men did not want to participant they simply refused the interview and I approached another individual who fit the target group. The samples, and communities, were selected using non-probability sampling as we could only sample those who were present in the communities on any given day, and I was obligated to travel to the communities where the

Sheriff/CDOs had work at that particular time. The Sheriff/CDOs spend considerable amounts of time trying to locate offenders in vast areas. Gender issues were not a main concern for this evaluation. However, it is an important issue especially if the evaluation topic is sensitive. If this is the case evaluators should consider employing Aboriginal research assistants/interviewers.

- ***Problems on the Road and the Need for Flexibility*** – we encountered a number of challenges on the road that were unforeseeable in the planning stages but that impacted on our ability to conduct the evaluation methodology as planned. These difficulties highlight the kinds of challenges facing evaluators that travel to remote areas. Examples of the barriers included:
 - ***Weather Conditions*** – we experienced huge storms and flooding that resulted in the road to Meekatharra being closed. We spent a whole day driving around the storm due to road closures and missed the communities we had previously organised to visit. We then got stranded in Wiluna for a couple of days and could not undertake the interviews as planned. In order to manage these interruptions and challenges the Sheriff/CDO telephoned the communities to let them know we were unable to attend for the particular reason. We then endeavoured to speak with the community advisors about the initiative over the telephone but in most cases this was unsuccessful and their views were not recorded in the evaluation. This meant that we only had a small sample of communities represented from the Gascoyne/Mid West.
 - ***Lore Activity*** – due to lore activities that were unexpectedly occurring in one community we were unable to consult with the community people as planned. Lore activities were not considered in the planning phases of the evaluation. It is important that these traditions are respected and in future I would discuss the timing of Lore activities with the community people/advisor when planning an evaluation. In this case we decided to visit another community in the area and see if they would like to participate in the evaluation.
 - ***Funerals*** – we were unable to visit one community due to the community grieving a death. Funerals are very important to Aboriginal people and when there is a funeral a large group of Aboriginal people will leave an area to attend. In some cases they will travel long distances to be present. This is not something that can be planned but is an obstacle evaluators need to be aware of. It is important to be in touch with community advisors when on the road and keep up to date with community/area information. These issues will change an evaluator's ability to access participants and when travelling such long distances this is imperative.
 - ***Remote Communication Challenges and Vehicle Problems*** – Satellite phones are used in remote areas and can sometimes be unreliable, making it difficult to contact people and alter plans. Vehicles can also burst tyres, delaying the evaluation schedule. Prior evaluation planning (and flexibility) is therefore very important.

Conclusion

Undertaking evaluation in remote Aboriginal communities is an interesting and stimulating experience, however there are many challenges that an evaluator can experience. In this context evaluation planning is very important and it is essential to work with and consult the Aboriginal communities you will be visiting. Permission to enter the communities and undertake evaluation is essential and it is not appropriate to evaluate in the communities without the consent of the community involved. Communication and language are also paramount and the communication process requires evaluators to be respectful, good listeners, aware of possible gender barriers, be understanding, and reflect dialogue for clarification. Culturally appropriate data gathering and respect for participants is important, as are ethical and moral considerations and community benefit. Researchers need to be aware of challenges on the road, such as, weather interruptions, possible Lore activities, distances travelled to access participants, and the need for flexibility in evaluation design. I learnt a lot about evaluation in remote areas; the biggest rewards were the great experience of driving through the country side, interacting with Aboriginal people to learn about their experience and culture, and writing a report and recommendations to effect positive change in service provision.

Map 1 of 2



KIMBERLEY REGION ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES Map 2 of 2



LEGEND

- Kundat Djaru Community Name
- Broome Town
- DIA boundary
- Roads

0 100 200
kilometres



Last Update : November 2006
www.dia.wa.gov.au

For communities in the remainder of the state,
please refer to Map 1 in this set of 2,
Western Australia - Aboriginal Communities



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